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ABSTRACT

Assessment programs, which have recently been implemented in colleges around the country, have indirectly affected the quality of education in ways that are both researchable and measurable. Admissions and placement testing affect educational quality by separating high and low achievers, and making it possible for high-level texts to be used and advanced discussions to take place with high achievers. However, neither testing method ensures instructional quality in the classroom. Exit examinations, on the other hand, have a more direct impact on quality, in that they require that the curriculum be geared to provide the knowledge to be tested at the exit point and that instructors teach at the level to be tested. While exit examinations should not be used as the basis for awarding or denying degrees, they can and should be used to monitor the curriculum by sampling student achievement on exit exams and providing feedback to faculty. The effects of implementing assessment programs on educational quality can be measured in terms of institutional climate before and after their implemantation and in terms of changes in areas such as type of student attracted to the institution, and graduation and transfer rates. Because the literature suggests that the high institutional expectations result in high student performance, minumum skills testing, which represents low-level expectations, should be avoided in favor of achievement tests, representing higher expectations. (DAB)

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Measuring the Impact of Student Assessment on Institutional Quality

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MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Office of Institutional Research

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During the last five years, an extraordinary change has overtaken education, linking assessment to instruction in a manner reminiscent of the period of the 1920s. Thirty-seven State legislatures have decided that minimal skills are needed to graduate from high school, having noted that quality must be improved and having offered assessment programs as a solution. The clear and inescapable assumption is that there does exist a strong relationship between assessment and quality of education.

The assessment movement is now heading full-force to two-year colleges. Florida has become one of the few states in the nation to require a common examination for all students moving from the sophomore to the junior level in public colleges. This legislative mandate may well be a model for other state legislators who see the value of exit assessment. The fanfare and the public relations releases suggest that quality must be improved and that this is one important step in the direction for improvement.

The primary purpose of this presentation is to suggest that the spin-off effects of assessment may indeed impact quality in ways that are researchable and measurable. Educational quality occurs in the classroom, not directly through testing. Testing may describe, or analyze, or monitor, but does not directly improve quality. The question for this paper is as follows: If we assume that testing does not directly impact quality, what are some indirect effects which may impact quality in a postive manner?

Probably the most serious difficulty in the area of assessment vis-a-vis quality comes in attempting to operationally define quality. For the moment, let us continue as though we have agreed on what quality is.

There are several ways in which assessment may indirectly impact quality of instruction. There are currently three major types of assessment programs appropriate for this discussion: (1) Admissions; (2) Placement; (3) Exit - (a) Minimum Skills Measurement, (b) Achievement Measures. With admissions testing, the issue of quality is indirectly impacted by determining in advance on the basis of criteria established by the faculty of the institution which students are to be taught. It seems quite clear on the basis of long history of research that if the institution selects only those students scoring in the top 20 percent on a standardized admissions test, that the quality of the program is assured. Note that this assurance merely means, in point of fact, that one has students who have in the past performed well academically but it does not logically follow that those students are going to be experiencing high-quality instruction in the classroom. What it does suggest is that high quality textbooks may be used with students who are highly academically inclined and that high level conceptual discussions may occur with such students. The converse of this argument is that in open-door institutions the quality of the program declines, inasmuch as academic skills are often well below minimal levels required to read textbooks and certainly well below levels required to interact on high levels of conceptual discussions.

Placement testing has less noticeable impact on quality, but some of the indirect implications are as follows. Faculty may have fewer students in the regular classrooms who are underprepared if the placement testing provides identification of the very lowest achievers and the curriculum also provides for remedial classroom work. Indirectly then, admission to the classroom is impacted in quite the same manner as an admissions test does for entrance into the college. The same relationships hold for selective

admissions to the course as for the college. Note, however, that placement testing in no way assures the quality of the students at the institution as a whole, nor does it do any more than merely describe deficiencies. In some quarters, one hears that placement testing is improving quality. This is stretching the indirect relationship inasmuch as the quality must be built into classroom instruction after the students have been described as having various levels of academic preparedness.

The next general area of assessment relates to examinations which are required before a degree is issued. Exit examinations have been around in high school and in college for a long time. They are certainly nothing new on the educational scene. They were in disfavor for the last twenty years due to what a recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education describes as a "misguided egalitarianism." Exit examinations take various forms. For example, multiple-choice examinations are common but there are also papers which are sometimes required at colleges for graduation, and there are at some colleges essay examinations similar to doctoral level qualifying examinations given to students prior to the award of the Bachelor's degree. In this instance, a more direct tie to quality can be seem to the extent that the curriculum is geared to provide the knowledge tested at the exit point.

In many instances, it is merely minimal skills which are being assessed rather than achievement levels. Minimal skills for functioning in life are difficult to define and nearly always result in an assessment which is very low level. On the other hand, achievement tests of the subject matter taught during the period covered, that is, for an AA or a BA, can be as high level as the faculty of a particular college decide. The

establishment of high-level achievement examinations certainly would do what placement testing does not do -- demand of faculty that they teach in the classroom at certain levels of instruction which are going to be assessed on the examination.

But how are exit examinations to be used? One of the answers is to make decisions about individuals on the basis of their performance and either pass or not pass the students. Another option is to use the exit examination as a monitor of the curriculum. In this model, the achievements of students would be sampled, perhaps using matrix sampling, and feedback provided to faculty in appropriate departments so that they may alter curriculum accordingly. Hence, students are not adversely affected on the basis of exit examinations directly, but improvement in the quality of the curriculum is clearly provided by such continual monitoring.

The best circumstance is provided when there is qualitative improvement in the curricular offerings, taking advantage of the information gathered by exit examination performance of students while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the instructor grade assignment. One of the pitfalls of overextending the influence of exit testing is that instructor grading can become fairly meaningless for the students. If the award of the degree depends solely upon testing, we are clearly moving toward a European model of education. This process, in essence, replaces the judgments of large numbers of instructors over a four-year period with a single three- or four-hour examination. It seems to me that on the basis of reliability, content validity, and construct validity, that the use of an examination for the purpose of making individual decisions with regard to awarding of degrees is an inappropriate route for the undergraduate level. This is

especially true since, with the vast numbers involved, we are surely going to to use multiple-choice tests almost exclusively. I think it is clearly demonstrated that the use of multiple-choice examinations facilitates one type of learning, but does not facilitate the type of learning that involves synthesis, judgments, and application. Therefore, both on theoretical and practical grounds, it would appear that exit examinations beyond the high school level should deal with achievement assessment and should be used as a monitoring process on the curriculum for feedback in order to strengthen the curriculum in areas in which students appear to be weak.

For researchers, the question is often put in the form: Can you demonstrate that the assessment has had any impact on the quality of the institution? There are a number of issues to be reviewed, both quantitative and qualitative. On the qualitative side, it would seem important to assess by use of some measure of academic climate the changes which occur on a pre- and post-basis. Institutional climate has been studied for many years, and measures are currently available. It would be beneficial to have an opportunity in which an institutional climate measure was provided prior to the initiation of an assessment program, or before a major change in the assessment program. Intuitively, it would seem clear that faculties, students, and other college personnel would be positively inclined toward an increase in quality. Empirically, we have conducted some research at Miami-Dade which suggests that after the initiation of College-wide placement testing, faculty and students alike were evaluating the changes positively.

There is also the issue of the type of student attracted to the institution, and certainly changes in the characteristics in the student body before and after the initiation of testing programs could be assessed.

On a quantitative basis, one could: (1) Assess the numbers of students who are progressing through the institution; (2) Determine the proportions passing state certification examinations of various types; (3) Determine proportions of students who progress to higher levels of education.

There is considerable research to indicate that high quality institutions graduate students at a higher rate and also send a higher proportion of their students on for more education. It would seem that this would be a fairly clear indirect measure of quality. In an important sense, the above research questions operationally define outcome measures of quality.

As Institutional Research in many colleges turns more in the direction of program evaluation, these issues become paramount. It is important for researchers to be aware of and raise the appropriate psychometric and related evaluation issues as these decisions are being debated on the campuses. It would be regretful if the two-year colleges, and perhaps even some of the four-year colleges, follow in the direction of the high school and attempted minimal skills testing. Most educators are familiar enough with the severe criticisms of the minimal skills testing process to be aware of the serious limitations, the most obvious of which is that only extremely low measures are used in nearly all instances and are not sufficiently demanding of students at the higher levels.

One of the more intriguing aspects of implementation of assessment programs relates to the concept of expectation vs. achievement. Considerable literature exists which demonstrates that students perform at levels which are expected of them and that low-level expectations elicit

low-level performance and high-level expectations elicit high-level performance. Of course, there are qualifiers that have to do with basic student abilities, but by and large it is a safe assumption to believe that by initiating fairly extensive common assessment programs, we are as colleges and universities expressing to the students a higher expectation for performance and we may safely assume that the students will improve the quality of performance in accord with their expectations.

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